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A WOMAN IN THE HARSH NORTH
Arctic Stereotypes and Colonialism in the Video Game
Horizon Zero Dawn: The Frozen Wilds

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ABSTRACT

Julia Stenman: "A Woman in the Harsh North: Arctic Stereotypes and Colonialism in the Video Game *Horizon Zero Dawn: The Frozen Wilds*"
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The Arctic has inspired numerous narratives about the region and explorers who have travelled there. These narratives have created views and stereotypes about the Arctic and its peoples. Representing a newer narrative format, the video game *Horizon Zero Dawn: The Frozen Wilds* (2017) considers the issues of colonialism and postcolonialism in the Arctic and how climate change and human actions affect the Arctic environment. The thesis shows that despite the game's criticism towards the colonialist views and actions in the Arctic, *Horizon Zero Dawn* reasserts and repeats stereotypes about the Arctic region and its cultures created by the earlier Arctic narratives.

Because of the extent of the topic and source materials, this thesis focuses on the gender stereotypes of the Arctic and Arctic narratives. The theoretical background for this thesis mainly consists of postcolonial Arctic studies that consider the effects of gendered views and colonialism on the Arctic. In addition, because of the role-playing aspects of the game, the thesis briefly considers the player's role and ability to affect the story.

First, the thesis shows how the Arctic is still portrayed as a harsh region where explorers and the Arctic's inhabitants alike can prove their toughness and masculinity, following the conventions and stereotypes of the earlier narratives. Even though *Horizon Zero Dawn* challenges the prevailing view that the Arctic is meant only for (Western) men to conquer, the game continues to present the Arctic as a proving ground. Second, the thesis analyses the game's protagonist Aloy, who is the player's avatar and an explorer from outside of the Arctic. While a female protagonist is an exception both in Arctic narratives and in video games, a closer analysis proves that Aloy is still a stereotypical white Western explorer who is portrayed as superior in skills compared to the indigenous people. However, the game primarily considers her as a woman and disregards her other aspects and deeds. The third section of the analysis indicates how this grants her special permissions when collecting and utilising the Arctic's resources.

Keywords: Arctic, postcolonialism, gender stereotypes, video games

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Arktinen alue on inspiroinut lukuisia kertomuksia Arktiksesta ja sinne matkanneista tutkijoista ja turisteista. Nämä kertomukset ovat puolestaan muokanneet käsityksiä arktisesta alueesta ja sen kansoista. Uudempaa narratiivista formaattia edustava videopeli *Horizon Zero Dawn: The Frozen Wilds* (2017) pyrkii muiden aiheiden lomassa ottamaan kantaa kolonialismiin ja jälkikolonialismiin arktisilla alueilla, sekä ilmastonmuutoksen ja ihmisten vaikutuksiin arktiseen luontoon. Tämä tutkielma osoittaa, kuinka *Horizon Zero Dawn* sisältämästään kritiikistä huolimatta myös toistaa aiempien arktisten kertomusten luomia stereotypioita arktisesta alueesta ja sen kulttuureista.

Materiaalin laajuuden vuoksi tämä työ keskittyy erityisesti tutkimaan Arktiksen ja arktisten kertomusten sukupuolistereotypioita. Tutkielman taustateoria koostuu pääasiassa Arktiksen jälkikolonialistisista tutkimuksista, jotka käsittelevät sukupuolirooleja ja kolonialismia, sekä niiden vaikutuksia Arktikseen ja mielikuviin arktisesta alueesta. Lisäksi pelin roolipeliominaisuuksien vuoksi tutkielma tarkastelee lyhyesti myös pelaajan roolia ja mahdollisuuksia vaikuttaa tarinan kulkuun.

Ensimmäiseksi tutkimus osoittaa, kuinka Arktis kuvataan aikaisempien stereotyyppien ja kertomusten tavoin karuna ja ankarana alueena, jossa matkailijat ja Arktiksen asukkaat voivat todistaa karskiutensa ja maskuliinisuutensa. Vaikka *Horizon Zero Dawn* haastaakin aikaisemmat käsitykset siitä, että Arktis olisi tarkoitettu valloitettavaksi vain (länsimaalaisille) miehille, peli esittää pohjoisen edelleen lähinnä areenana kykyjen todistamiseen. Seuraavaksi tutkimus analysoi pelin protagonistia Aloyta, joka on pelaajan ohjaama arktisen alueen ulkopuolelta saapuva seikkailija Arktiksella. Nainen päähenkilönä on poikkeus sekä arktisissa kertomuksissa että videopeleissä, mutta tarkempi analyysi osoittaa Aloy'n olevan edelleen monin tavoin stereotyyppinen seikkailija, joka kuvataan länsimaalaisena ja Arktiksen alkuperäisväestöä kyvykkäämpänä. Peli kuitenkin käsittelee Aloyta ensisijaisesti naisena ja sivuuttaa tämän muut ominaisuudet ja teot, minkä tutkimuksen kolmas analyysiosuus osoittaa antavan tälle erityisiä oikeuksia arktisen alueen resursseja kerätessä ja käyttäessä.

Avainsanat: Arktis, arktinen alue, jälkikolonialismi, sukupuolistereotypiat, videopelit

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1. Introduction

For centuries, people have travelled to the Arctic region – roughly the area north of the northern hemisphere’s polar circle: the Arctic Ocean, parts of Alaska, Canada, Greenland, Iceland, Fennoscandia, and Russia – in search of resources, commerce, and adventure. Like Adriana Craciun notes, the Arctic has interested, for instance, England since the fourteenth century when Martin Frobisher attempted to establish the first Arctic North American colonies (108). The interest has not faded over the centuries and the now rapidly melting ice sheet of the Arctic Ocean attracts Europeans, Americans, Russians, and other peoples outside the Arctic as new resources and sea routes are exposed.¹ On the other hand, the melting glaciers have also stirred anxiety for the environment’s future, and the Arctic has become a symbol for the ongoing climate change. As a result of the Arctic’s contemporary relevancy and the popularity of the Arctic voyages since the nineteenth century, the region has inspired numerous factual and fictional narratives. For many people living outside the Arctic, these narratives are often the only sources of knowledge about the region; consequently, they affect how people view the Arctic. The narratives have created prevailing stereotypes about the Arctic as a masculine proving ground, empty of life except for occasional indigenous peoples that are portrayed as primitive compared to the Western voyagers. How we see the Arctic affects how we treat it, and narratives, stereotypes, and views about it must therefore be critically observed.

One of the newer narrative formats that use the Arctic as a setting or inspiration are video games. Guerrilla Game’s adventure video game *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017) is set in a post-apocalyptic thirty-first century North America where new cultures and communities have replaced the twenty-first century civilisations. The invented world features and reflects issues of the real

¹ Because most of the source and research material of this thesis are Western texts and narratives, I will occasionally use only the term *Western* as opposed to the term *southern* that would include Russia and Asian countries that have been involved in Arctic colonialism. When the term *southern* is used, it denotes the regions outside the Arctic that are south from the Arctic perspective, unless otherwise specified.

contemporary world from (post-)colonialism to climate change, which enables the game to both repeat and criticise colonialist discourse. While the game has been studied from other perspectives – such as religion, art, and aesthetics – the game’s representation of the Arctic has so far been ignored in academic studies.

This thesis will focus on the game’s expansion pack *The Frozen Wilds* (2017), which introduces a northern environment resembling the real world’s Arctic. I argue that *The Frozen Wilds* both reasserts and criticises stereotypes – especially gender stereotypes – of Arctic narratives when it attempts to challenge stereotypical gender roles in the Arctic. The theoretical background for this mainly consists of postcolonial Arctic studies that consider issues of feminism and colonialism that affect or are present in the Arctic. The theory will be used to analyse why the Arctic has been perceived as a masculine space, how this notion has prevailed, and how it ultimately affects people’s views of the Arctic’s uses and exploitation. Then, I will first analyse the wider gender dynamics and ideals within the game’s north: how the game presents the Arctic’s population and gender conventions in general, and how the characters react to following or confronting the conventions within the game. Second, the thesis will examine the game’s protagonist Aloy, a young white woman from the southern areas of the game’s world, and how she as the player’s avatar challenges and reasserts the stereotypes of Arctic narratives. Finally, the thesis considers how questioning the Arctic stereotypes through the main character, other characters, and gender ideals affects the image of the Arctic’s as a resource. Because *Horizon Zero Dawn* features some role-playing elements and an open world where the player can move almost without restrictions, the thesis will also briefly consider the player’s role – whether the player can affect Aloy’s character and what kinds of acts are allowed or encouraged in the game.

2. The Significance of Gender and Ethnicity in the Arctic

Aloy's gender is significant because the traditional notion is that the Arctic is a space exclusively for men and especially for white men. As Lisa Bloom notes, during the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century the Arctic functioned as a proving ground for men which ensured "the survival of white masculinity": there was a notion that the explorers had to be or become masculine and physical work in the harsh and cold conditions was a test for them (32). Consequently, the idea of the Arctic as a masculine proving ground further "legitimized the exclusion of women from many public domains of discourse" (6). Jen Hill agrees that when men could participate in expeditions geographically far from the centres of Western societies, the division between men's public space and women's domestic sphere became even more evident (7). While the men were away and inspired heroic narratives, the women were even further bound to the home – both their own households and in a larger scale, the Western centres. Although gender roles are nowadays more flexible in Western societies, traditional gender stereotypes are still present in the Arctic narratives. Heidi Hansson notes that contemporary narratives continue to portray the Arctic as a "masculine testing ground" (224). For example, the film *Into the Wild* (2007) and documentary film *Chasing Ice* (2012) are centred around white men and their journeys, continuing the legacy of the nineteenth-century Arctic narratives.

As for the Arctic environment, the ideal nineteenth-century Arctic was sublime and stainless. It was pictured as physically white, covered in unstained ice and snow, which erased geographical complexity (Hill 32). Similarly, the exploration of the Arctic was regarded as a morally pure enterprise (Hill 9). Because the Arctic was stereotyped as an empty frontier for white men to conquer, the presence of the indigenous peoples in the Arctic was dismissed or forgotten (9). This cultural erasure meant that it could be colonised without the moral issues related to the more densely populated southern colonies in Africa, Asia, and Oceania (9); for example, there were less

economic interests in the north and, from the colonial perspective, there were no issues with slavery or as much conflict with the indigenous populations.

Although the focus of the Arctic expeditions has ranged from material exploitation to personal and national displays of power, the Arctic has always been a resource for the people outside the Arctic. Craciun argues that the Arctic's exploration still revolves around the same interests as it did when Europeans first begin to travel north: (material) resources and commerce (108). She illustrates her point through the Northwest Passage: since the nineteenth century, Western explorers have aimed to find and claim this passage to the Arctic's natural resources and sea routes to the markets of the northern hemisphere, and through them, "limitless exchange and profit" (104). According to Craciun, the Northwest Passage has not been regarded "as a distinct place, but as a threshold to a desired elsewhere" (104). Similarly, for the Arctic's outsiders, the Arctic has been a route to the riches rather than an intrinsically valuable space. *Horizon Zero Dawn* introduced Aloy as a hunter-gatherer in an interactable world where the player can collect different useful and valuable objects. As a result, *The Frozen Wilds* expansion pack brings an outsider gathering resources in the Arctic context.

Regarding the Arctic as a space exclusively for white men and as a resource are linked to each other. Because the Arctic was and is seen as empty, the viewpoints of the indigenous peoples are still ignored (Craciun 109), which has enabled Europe, North America, and Russia to make land claims in the Arctic without further consequences. Now in the twenty-first century, the rapidly melting Arctic has drawn the attention of the countries and continents anew as the frozen resources of the High Arctic are becoming accessible. In the middle of the ongoing environmental crisis, their continuing pursuit with new technology may even hasten the destruction of the Arctic environment (108).

While addressing environmental issues, the game also draws parallels to the real-world colonialism and its consequences in the Arctic. Before the events of the playable game, a southern

majority culture known as the Carja attempted to colonise the northern region and forcibly relocate the Banuk, people native to the northern area, by pushing them further north and taking some of them as a workforce to the south. Similar events occurred for example in Canada in the twentieth century, when the government relocated the Inuit in order to gain access to the resources of the High Arctic (Craciun 109). In the game's present, the northern area where the conflicts between the Carja and the Banuk take place is known as the Cut; the name suggests a wound representing the traumas of violent colonisation and oppression. However, the name is not the only sign of the conflicts. After the violence and relocations of the Banuk ceased, the southern cultures began seeing the Cut either as a destination for exotic holidays and exploration, or as a potential trading route. As in the real world where the interest in the Arctic as a source of economic prosperity or a travel destination has resurfaced (Hill 27-28), the game's Arctic was, and still is, the final frontier for Western-like cultures' explorers and exploiters.

The game's emphasis on the story and dialogue enables the game to address issues of Arctic colonialism in depth. When the player explores the world, engages in combat, or solves small puzzles, they are mainly moving between predefined cinematic cutscenes that proceed the story and the game's completion. However, because of the interactive nature of video games and the limited role-playing choices that the game offers, I have decided to include consideration of the player's role and the game's influence. The presumable target audience of *Horizon Zero Dawn* lives outside the Arctic and thus the game may influence the player's views of the Arctic. Although the interactive nature of the game does not automatically change or represent the player's ideology or values, Miguel Sicart notes that commitment to the game carries that possibility (12). On the other hand, the player can be critical towards their game avatar's actions and morals even if they actively direct their avatar to do morally questionable choices. Much like other forms of fiction, games also enable us to explore the forbidden, and as a result, an immoral or unethical avatar does not automatically reflect or change the player's morality (Sicart 15). However, while some games

enable the players to explore the forbidden without any real consequences, other video games have been designed to influence the player. Sicart reminds that because games have been used as “propaganda for violent and unethical discourses” – whether it is militarization or Arctic colonialism – players and game developers alike have to be aware of the original intentions of the narrative and game conventions (20). Therefore, I will briefly examine what values the game promotes and what actions it encourages.

3. The Masculine Proving Ground

This chapter will focus on how *The Frozen Wilds* reasserts the stereotype of the Arctic as a proving ground and as a mainly masculine space despite the inclusion of women in the story. As mentioned, Arctic exploration has principally been reserved for white men both in real life and narratives. Superficially, the game seems to challenge this and features multiple women in the Arctic. The majority of the interactable characters are women of various professions: shamans, artists, hunters, and even chieftains of Banuk “tribes” – *weraks* in the game world’s terms – although the chieftain with the most central role is a male. Unlike in the nineteenth-century narratives, women are not bound to the domestic sphere in the game’s Arctic setting. They are active and visible, and they have similar occupations as men; some even have positions that are strictly reserved for men in the game world’s south such as a hunting grounds keeper.

Furthermore, the game challenges the stereotype of the empty and blank Arctic reserved only for explorers. The majority of the women (and men) encountered in the Arctic are Banuk, and while most of the *explorers* met in the Cut are men, the game presents the Cut as populated in addition to being geographically diverse. Even though most of the area of *The Frozen Wilds* is covered in snow, the terrain varies from glaciers to forests, and Banuk people and animals can be encountered anywhere around the area. Even on sites where the Banuk themselves are not present, their culture is visible: they have marked paths around the Cut (and beyond it) with colourful and

recognisable fabrics and paintings on cliffs and rocks. The extent of the large paintings tells about the long history of the Banuk around the area, which makes it impossible for the explorers to make land claims in the area without openly conquering it. Despite that, the Banuk lands were colonised or attempted to colonise, but the Banuk are given a presence and a voice that help them educate others about it.

However, while the game's Arctic is not exclusively a white male domain anymore, it is still a proving ground. Initially, the game seems to criticise and mock this view through the explorers of the southern Carja culture. Before Aloy ventures north, the player can choose her to have a conversation with a young Carja nobleman Rhavid, who is eager to join other Carja hunters in the Cut to hunt animal-like machines that are part of the ecosystem in "the Banuk wilds". He describes the Cut as "something of a no man's land" that now "makes for excellent hunting". Aloy notes that the land previously populated exclusively by the Banuk is now "a no man's land" because of colonialism and the war between the Carja and the Banuk. Rhavid simply wants to utilise the Cut as a proving ground for his personal skills and masculinity like the other Carja hunters. Aloy soon notices his ignorance and inexperience and comments on them. Yet, even the Banuk see the north as a harsh proving ground. In the launch trailer of the game, werak chieftain Aratak says that "always these frozen wilds have punished us", as if the Arctic was a living, conscious entity capable of being cruel towards people. In the actual game, he states that a Banuk would rather die than withdraw from a challenge as the entire Banuk culture is centred around proving oneself. Thus, both male and female Banuk and explorers alike act like nineteenth-century Arctic explorers who use the harsh north to demonstrate their strength and resilience.

The Arctic is presented as dangerous not only in the dialogue, but also in the actual gameplay and the game's statistics. The enemies encountered in the Cut are more difficult than elsewhere in *Horizon Zero Dawn*, causing more damage to the player's avatar, and defeating them consumes more time and resources. The presented challenge is understandable, because *The Frozen*

Wilds is an expansion pack for the players who probably have played through the base game before. Yet, reserving the last levels or harder enemies to the Arctic and northern areas is not unique in video games. For instance, in *Ōkami* (Clover Studio, 2006) one of the last regions is an icy snow-covered Kamui, and in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011), many hostile animals have at least two variants: the base creature (bear, wolf) and an Arctic variant (snow bear, ice wolf), which is always the more challenging one. Thus, reserving the hardest region for the Arctic is probably not a coincidence in *The Frozen Wilds*, considering that it is so far the only expansion pack to *Horizon Zero Dawn* and the harshness is highlighted in the dialogues.

Even though the game's Arctic environment is a proving ground for everyone, not just for white men, it is still mostly a masculine space. The men and women are technically equal, but this is mainly achieved through presenting women as strong fighters and adventurers. Among the Banuk, traits that have traditionally been masculine in Western standards, such as physical strength, are admired and aspired for. On the other hand, tasks that are traditionally feminine in Western society, such as childcare, are disdained. For instance, if the player speaks with a Banuk woman Ikrie after the side quest "The Survivor", she tells Aloy that she "never knew [her] parents" and tells a Banuk saying: "An infant means two fewer hands to hunt with". Hunting, which is traditionally seen as a male domain, is placed before domestic life, which is traditionally female domain. Aloy and other women in the Arctic are as capable as men – or sometimes even more capable –, but they must prove it by being as strong as men and abandoning the traditionally feminine traits and tasks.

4. A White Woman in the Arctic

While disparaging the traditionally or stereotypically feminine traits and lifestyles is not especially progressive, the Banuk culture gives the women an equal chance to leave the domestic sphere, so the women themselves are not inherently inferior in Banuk society. While white men have traditionally been in the centre of the Arctic narratives, the game gives women an equal status as

explorers and retains Aloy as the protagonist of the Arctic expansion pack. Like the protagonists of other Arctic narratives, the majority of the video game protagonists have been men such as *Uncharted* (Naughty Dog) series' Nathan Drake, and most of the protagonists of *Far Cry* (Ubisoft) and *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft) series. Although some of the more recent games have begun to include women as playable characters such as *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (2018), where the player can choose between a male and female avatar, a female protagonist still challenges the conventions and stereotypes of the industry. As a protagonist and the avatar of the player, Aloy is both an unconventional video game protagonist and an atypical Arctic explorer. It is worth noting that Aloy is not even one of the possible avatars; instead, she is the only option the player has: the game entirely removes the player's option to be a male coloniser and explorer in the Cut.

Despite Aloy's gender, she is still physically white. Of course, it could be argued that since the game's cultures are invented, she is not technically a white Western woman. However, she did not grow up among these new cultures, because the one she was born into, the Nora culture, made her an outcast as a child for reasons she cannot fully understand. Therefore, she is distanced from her own people while she has explored the old Western culture. She has acquired ancient twenty-first century technology and information from the ruins of the old North American cities that other people do not have. Compared to the other characters of the game, she is clearly more Western. In contrast, the Banuk have aesthetics that are (in Western stereotypes) associated with indigenous peoples such as tipi shaped shelters, shamans, and a nomadic lifestyle. While women and indigenous peoples are both minorities in the Arctic narratives, Bloom also mentions that the occasional white female explorers are nevertheless positioned above indigenous people (10). Likewise, as physically white and culturally Western, Aloy was chosen as a protagonist for Arctic exploration over characters of other ethnic groups.

A protagonist is not necessarily a person that the other characters or the audience would admire. Nevertheless, as the game proceeds, Aloy begins to be portrayed as superior to the Banuk in

skills and intellect. During the main quest of *The Frozen Wilds*, she attempts to find a shaman woman called Ourea, but her apprentice Naltuk refuses to help Aloy because Ourea is somewhere only Banuk shamans are allowed to go. This changes when Aloy destroys a dangerous machine that has appeared in the Cut. To do this, the player must either find the machine's weakness with Aloy's small computer device or override the machine with her spear's technological module; both of these are twenty-first century technological devices she has found. Again, her western whiteness is ignored, perhaps because she also challenges stereotypes as a woman with technological aptitude. When Aloy has defeated the machine, Naltuk begins to treat her as a symbol of hope and grants her a permission to follow Ourea, because the Banuk had not managed to stop the machine before her. Even when it is established throughout the game that the Banuk do not accept help from the outsiders, they welcome Aloy when she proves the superiority of her skills and demonstrates the advantage the Western technology gives her compared to the traditional Banuk hunting. This reaffirms the stereotype that indigenous peoples would need the aid and interference of white people to preserve their environment (Bloom 93).

Like Aloy, Ourea is also attempting to solve the machine problems in the north. She has isolated herself from her werak after they refused to help her enter a sealed Firebreak ruin, and as a result, she resorts to Aloy's aid. To achieve their goal and gain access to the ruin, Aloy must become a chieftain of Ourea's werak, meaning that she must challenge and overthrow Ourea's stoic brother Aratak. Because Ourea suggests this idea, she becomes a traitor to her brother. According to Shari M. Huhndorf, in the context of white colonialism and invasion, this "role of traitor" is most frequently given to indigenous women; in contrast, the chiefs and warriors who resist white colonialism are stereotypically presented as men (106). Aloy appears reluctant at first and says she does not "want to be Chieftain of anything, much less a bunch of Banuk that don't want [her]". When Aloy does not openly agree to conquering the northern area, she appears as a less colonising character. On the other hand, it also makes Ourea more accountable of the idea, as she suggests it

and presents is as the only option. The player will have to agree if they want to proceed in the game, and eventually Aloy wins the challenge, becomes the chieftain of the werak and is accepted by the Banuk. Even Aratak regards her as superior after the challenge and recognises her as “the better hunter” and a chieftain.

Even though Aloy is Western and white, again her gender prevents her classification as a purely stereotypical coloniser. Although Huhndorf argues that giving the role of the traitor to indigenous women aims to diminish indigenous women’s power (106), this does not seem to be the case in *The Frozen Wilds*. Despite their roles, Aloy and Ourea are presented as active and influential characters. Ourea’s treachery places her in a stereotypical role, but their plan also gives her agency and visibility in an Arctic narrative, and the plan itself could be read as aiming to improve women’s status in the Arctic because they oppose the stereotypical male chieftain.

5. The Melting Resources

As mentioned in the earlier chapters, environmental issues are major theme in *Horizon Zero Dawn*. This chapter will examine how the game addresses Arctic’s exploitation, and furthermore, what kind of character Aloy is if analysed from this perspective. In other words, the chapter will consider how the Arctic explorers and exploiters are treated in *The Frozen Wilds* and whether the hunter-gatherer Aloy receives similar or different treatment. Because *Horizon Zero Dawn* allows resource gathering, I will examine the game’s mechanics in addition to the scenes and dialogues that address environmental issues.

In addition to visually emphasising environmental issues and hazards that humans have caused in the Arctic through ruins and corrupted machine fauna, the game criticises the use of the Arctic as a resource through the dialogue and caricatured southern characters. As previously mentioned, Carja explorers in the Cut have travelled there to achieve personal victories over the harsh Arctic. They are represented as unprepared and arrogant: all the Carja hunters that are

encountered in the north are dressed in their light southern silks and they camp in open canvas tents while ignoring the warnings and concerns of the Banuk about the dangers of the environment. Similarly, another southern culture, the Oserams, attempts to use the Arctic for their own profit. While the Carja are tourists in the Arctic, the Oserams seek financial success. For example, when the player enters the Cut, one of the first people they have a conversation with is an Oseram man named Burgrend. When the Banuk have gathered to solve their ecological crisis, to Burgrend it is a way to gain new customers. Instead of genuinely offering help, he waits and hopes they will “accept a little reasonably-priced aid” and already imagines his “own little trading route, stretching all the way back to the [south]”. Similar to Western societies since the nineteenth century, he and other Oserams are dreaming of economically benefiting from the Arctic and are either establishing markets in the Banuk villages or scavenging and seeking resources from the wilderness. While the Carja tourists are ignorant, the Oserams are depicted as greedy and materialistic.

However, the Carja hunters are not the only ones who fight and destroy the wild machine fauna and the Oserams are not the only ones extracting resources from the Cut. The player can also direct Aloy to gather materials from the Arctic. She comes from the Nora hunter-gatherer culture, so it is reasonable that the game allows the player to hunt and collect resources. However, because of the Arctic’s history as a resource to the outsiders, it is worth examining whether the game differentiates between taking only the necessities to survive and exploiting the Arctic. No one in the game mentions anything even if the player takes everything they come across, so there is no explicit criticism targeted at Aloy for extracting resources. On the contrary, because of the more difficult enemies in the Cut, the player must use more ammunition to survive the combat scenes. This means they must gather more materials to craft more arrows and traps to stay alive.

In theory, the player could try to spare resources by avoiding most combats. Nevertheless, Aloy is portrayed as a skilled hunter and some of the quests require destroying the machines; thus, avoiding all combat and resource gathering would be transgressive playing. Then again, it could be

argued that even when taking everything they can, the game does not allow the player to extract resources excessively and irresponsibly. For example, the player can gather only twigs and not cut down entire trees or take only certain plants while leaving most of the vegetation untouched; and most of the resources reappear or grow back as time passes. Further, when the player destroys machines, they can collect some scattered parts from the ground and reuse them, leaving less metal waste in the environment.

What is harder to justify is that the player can also gather rare crystals called bluegleam found only in the Banuk lands. While the characters Aloy interacts with mostly ignore her gathering, some acknowledge the value of the bluegleam. Shaman apprentice Naltuk tells Aloy that the Banuk believe bluegleam is frozen Blue Light, something that the Banuk believe to be the essence of life and harmony. While he grants her the permission to follow Ourea through the Shaman's Path and past a bluegleam shrine, he also encourages her to take a piece of it as a reward, similar to other shamans who complete the trail. After he has established the cultural value of bluegleam and allowed her to participate in their traditions, he admits unenthusiastically that she "might be more interested that merchants will trade well for it [sic]". The player is thus given two different measurements of value for the crystal, cultural and monetary, and also an indirect choice of what to do with this information and bluegleam. Regardless of the player's choice, the characters in the world – including Naltuk – do not react to the use of resources. If the player collects bluegleam, they can use it to buy high-quality items that have exquisite designs, offer more protection, and cause more damage compared to the base game's outfits and weapons. Thus, the resource gathering in the Arctic is not forced but it is encouraged and rewarded.

If the game mechanics and partly even the characters in the game encourage Aloy to hunt dangerous machines and collect resources in order to exchange them for expensive wares, why are the Carja hunters and the Oseram merchants criticised for the same actions? The game does not explicitly indicate that Aloy would somehow consume less resources than the other explorers, or

address whether there exists a line between survival and exploitation. The difference could be in her intentions: she aims to identify the source of the problems, while the Oseram merchants wait for the Banuk to pay for their help. The game's mechanics also prevent the player from selling the crystals to the south, as the only merchants who have the rare bluegleam equipment are Banuk merchants. If the player does not sell the crystals to them, they are left unrewarded. However, the bluegleam's use as a mean of payment seems to be a matter of debate even within Banuk community: while some criticise it, others accept it. Likewise, as with the lack of comments regarding resource gathering, the cultural value of the bluegleam mostly becomes evident while speaking to Banuk shamans, while the rest of the Banuk ignore it in their conversations. As a result, the game ignores rather than explains Aloy's special treatment.

What seems to differentiate her from the Carja and Oseram explorers is her culture and gender. Except for Aloy, the Nora do not travel outside their lands and thus she is the only one from her tribe encountered in the Cut. She is also one of the few women from the south in the Cut as all the Carja and Oseram explorers that she interacts with are men, except for two minor characters. Unlike the men, the few women from the south are not mocked through caricaturing. Rather than repeating the stereotypes, they have defied their cultural norms by coming to the Cut. As a result, the white or Western women seem to be left outside the critique because of their gender. Sicart argues that in ethical gameplay, it does not matter who the avatar is, but "how they are presented" (14). A character who repeats, for example, colonial tropes, does not necessarily make the game unethical if they or their acts are presented as questionable. Likewise, Aloy's gender does not automatically make her an ethical protagonist even if she deviates from the stereotype of the white male explorer. The game seems to focus only on her gender and ignore the whiteness and colonialism. While she is allowed to act like other Arctic explorers have before her – exploiting, proving her superiority, and conquering – she is not an object of the same criticism the game targets at the Western male explorers.

6. Conclusions

The Frozen Wilds and its female protagonist defy gender conventions and stereotypes of the Arctic narratives and video games alike. The women in *Horizon Zero Dawn*'s Arctic are not helpless and invisible background characters but strong and active. Nevertheless, the earlier tradition's influence on the game is still noticeable. On one hand, the women in the game strive for independence from the men (and other people) who try to control their lives and are as capable as men while traveling in the Arctic. On the other hand, the women must still become like the masculine men – strong, independent, not bound to the family – in order to survive in the Arctic. Thus, the harshness of and the characters in the Arctic have not changed, but some of the explorers are now presented as women.

The portrayal of the Western and indigenous people in the Arctic has not changed much either. While the protagonist considers indigenous people as equal and Western-like people's remarks that belittle the Banuk are portrayed as rude and arrogant, the white protagonist becomes the saviour and hero of the indigenous people. The Banuk are equally human with Aloy, but they are still given stereotypical roles like a guide, traitor woman, and a stoic masculine chieftain.

While Aloy is a woman, she is still a white protagonist who saves the indigenous people and gathers material rewards during the Arctic expedition. Whether she is collecting resources to help others or mostly to benefit herself is not discussed in the game and it is left for the player to decide. Unlike the male explorers in the game, her exploitation is not hindered by the indigenous people. While the reasons are not explicit, her gender appears to grant her permission to adopt the role of a white coloniser as she is not a stereotypical Arctic explorer. The game does not only permit, but also encourages the player to take an active role in search of the Arctic's resources and becoming the leader of the indigenous people. Despite the game's attempts to challenge the Arctic stereotypes, the harsh north of *The Frozen Wilds* is still a masculine proving ground.

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